



## Voices from the Bolivian *Altiplano*: Perspectives on empowerment among Aymara women<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This paper examines the perspectives on empowerment among Aymara women against the concept of empowerment as it evolves in the context of international development. Through the analysis of findings from a series of field observations it was found that Aymara women had a threefold perspectives of empowerment: (1) Empowerment as participation where women could find a voice and take collective action; (2) Empowerment as leadership where women were enabled to take the reins of local change; and (3) Empowerment through conflict where women could open up space and shift roles in adverse situations. The paper concludes by reiterating the need for studies of empowerment to embed the local within the national and global. By identifying the interconnectivity between Aymara women in El Alto and La Paz, national politics, and international scholarship, the paper calls for a framework that captures how institutions, politics, and society construct empowerment.

**Keywords:** conflicts, development and empowerment, leadership, participation, women empowerment, empowerment constructs

### Introduction: The evolving concept of empowerment

In the context of international development, empowerment began to receive widespread attention during the era of structural adjustment programmes (1980s-1990s). Proponents of structural adjustment argued that empowering poor people reduced their dependence on subsidies, relieved the public sector of the need to fund social welfare, and encouraged decentralisation of the state (Craig & Mayo, 1995; Gill, 1995; Ruckert, 2009). In this context, empowerment was closely linked to notions of self-help and the transfer of responsibility for development from the state to the local—and even the individual—level. However, the term empowerment likewise served scholars and activists seeking alternative methods of development. Robert Chambers (1983, 1993) articulates a particularly influential vision of empowerment, which he defines as a process by which “people, especially poorer people, are enabled to take more control over their lives and secure a better livelihood with ownership and control of productive assets as one key element” (1993: 11).

Empowerment is often discussed in relation to women and development, a trend that emerged during the 1980s as empowerment was identified as a feminist project. According to DAWN (Development with Women for a New Era)—a network of feminist activists and writers from the Global South—empowerment is a process of awakening in which women realise their position within an unjust system and engage in collective action in order to challenge such systems (Sen & Grown, 1987). For many feminist scholars, women’s empowerment is fundamentally a question of power relations. Batliwala writes:

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Women's empowerment, if it is a real success, does mean the loss of men's traditional power and control over the women in their households: control of her body and her physical mobility; the right to abdicate from all responsibility for housework and the care of children; the right to physically abuse or violate her; the right to spend family income on personal pleasures (and vices); the right to abandon her or take other wives; the right to take unilateral decisions which affect the whole family; and the countless other ways in which poor men—and indeed men of every class—have unjustly confined women (1993, 234).

The work of feminist writers on empowerment has been widely influential, and development organisations such as the World Bank discuss empowerment with particular interest in its benefits for women. In his study of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) submitted to the World Bank by governments of developing countries, Thin (2002) finds that the term empowerment is widely used, often with respect to women.

Another school of empowerment thought emerges from the work of philosopher Amartya Sen (1985, 1992, 1999, 2005) and focuses on the concepts of agency and human capabilities. Kabeer (1999), for example, defines empowerment as a process by which those who have been previously denied the ability to make choices acquire such ability. More specifically, empowerment rests on the realisation of the three dimensions of choice, identified by Kabeer as resources (the material, human, and social pre-conditions of decision-making); agency (the ability to set goals and act upon them); and achievements (the outcomes of making choices). Similarly, Alsop and Heinsohn (2005) define empowerment as the expansion of agency (the ability to act on behalf of what one values and has reason to value) as well as institutional environment (the opportunity structure that allows for the effective exercise of agency).

The final category of empowerment scholarship reviewed here emphasises empowerment as a mechanism for increasing citizen participation and achieving the dual goals of development and good governance. The World Bank has actively promoted this idea, and the word empowerment now appears in the documentation of over 1,800 World Bank-aided projects (Alsop & Heinsohn 2005: 5). In the 2000/1 World Development Report, the Bank defines empowerment as “enhancing the capacity of poor people to influence the state institutions that affect their lives, by strengthening their participation in political processes and local decision making” (39). The following year the Bank published *The Sourcebook on Empowerment and Poverty Reduction*, which defines empowerment as “the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives” (2002: 11). Critics argue, however, that such discussion of popular participation ignores power relations; participation is used not as a method of empowerment, but rather as a method of co-optation. Francis (2001), for example, argues that the Bank's use of participation as a means of empowerment neglects “the underlying structural determinants of well-being: such as distribution of assets, income and power across ethnicity, class, gender and caste” (85).

This brief review shows that empowerment is an evolving concept. Within the field of international development, empowerment has been used to promote structural adjustment reforms, alternative paradigms of development, feminist perspectives of development, and participatory development and governance. This paper analyses how the voices of Aymara women fit into these conversations.

### **Aymara women in El Alto and La Paz, Bolivia**

In 2005 Evo Morales, an indigenous coca farmer, was elected President of Bolivia, culminating more than five years of popular protests against the Bolivian state. Upon his inauguration as President, Morales promised Bolivia's indigenous populations that “A new millennium has arrived for the original peoples of the world.” Many among the excited crowd at the inauguration ceremony held signs that read “We have returned and we are millions” in reference to the final declaration of Aymara rebel Tupak Katari—“I will return and I will be millions”—moments before he was executed by the Spanish in 1781 (Albro, 2006: 412).

The rumblings of mass discontent that brought Evo Morales to power began with the advent of economic reforms and structural adjustment in 1985. Through successive presidencies, Bolivian leaders pursued austerity measures that reduced the state's workforce, devalued the currency, and froze wages. Additional measures prohibited the state from investing in productive enterprises, privatised key state industries, and encouraged foreign investment (Kohl & Farthing, 2006; Morales, 2009; Kaup, 2010). Economic restructuring was met with resistance from many sectors of Bolivian society, including indigenous populations. Mobilising across the country, indigenous activists demanded the reversal of economic austerity measures, the recognition of political and economic autonomy for indigenous groups, and the "decolonisation" of Bolivian society (Lavaud, 2007; Reglasky, 2010).

During this period, Aymara women in the neighbouring cities of El Alto and La Paz emerged as powerful symbols of the failure of the political system. Structural adjustment weakened rural economies, inducing the migration of droves of indigenous Bolivians to El Alto, the satellite city swelling up around the capitol of La Paz (Arbona & Kohl, 2004; Risør, 2010). Disparities in inheritance practices in many agrarian communities added additional incentive for women to seek livelihood in the city, resulting in a significant influx of Aymara women residing in El Alto. These women were known as *cholas*—Indians living in the cities. Discrimination against *cholas* in formal employment fuelled the participation of Aymara women in informal consumer markets. *Cholas*—easily recognised by their gathered *pollera* skirts and derby hats—dominated the La Paz markets and El Alto thoroughfares (Gill, 1993). Excluded from the formal economy and subsisting on the informal sale of commercial and agricultural goods, these *cholas* came to symbolise the damage inflicted by economic reforms on all poor Bolivians, indigenous and non-indigenous (Loayza Castro, 1997; Rivera Cusicanqui, 2004).

The year 2003 proved to be explosive for El Alto and La Paz, indeed, for the entire country. In February President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada announced a new tax, sparking clashes between protestors and police forces in La Paz that resulted in 33 deaths (Albó, 2006: 342). On September 15, citizens of El Alto mobilised against municipal plans to tax real estate transactions. Protestors launched a 48-hour blockade that pressured the municipal government to table the tax initiative. This success emboldened protestors who began to mobilise against the national government's plan to export natural gas to the United States via Chile. The subsequent protests became known as the Gas Wars, and that month as "Red October." On October 8, citizens of El Alto launched a general strike, bringing the metropolitan area to a grinding halt. In a fateful attempt to restore order, Sánchez de Lozada sent the military into El Alto on October 13; at least 67 protestors were killed and 400 injured (Auza, 2004; Webber, 2010). On October 15, an estimated 500,000 citizens marched from El Alto to La Paz in protest of the violence. On October 17, protestors rallied once again to march to La Paz, this time successfully demanding the resignation of President Sánchez de Lozada (Dangl, 2007).

*Cholas* were key actors in these uprisings. Thousands of women participated in the protests, often struggling on the front lines. Aymara women organised marches, painted anti-privatisation graffiti, built road blockades, and prepared bombs (Arnold & Spedding, 2005: 64-68; Dosh & Kligerman, 2010: 210). During the uprisings, Aymara dress became a symbol of both ethnic and gender pride as throngs of Aymara women donned *pollera* skirts and derby hats to participate in street protests. The *pollera* in particular has since come to symbolise Bolivia's pre-colonial indigenous heritage and the history of discrimination endured by indigenous peoples. This dress also invokes *cholas*' class identity as market women, framing them as actors on the fringe of the neoliberal economy. During the protests, Aymara women further emphasised their indigenous identity by demanding that mediators sent by the government speak in Aymara, even though the majority of protestors understood Spanish (Albó, 2006). Albó argues that Aymara women employed highland Andean cultural frames as "an effective instrumental idiom of distinction" in their confrontation with the government, making them "heirs to a primordial Andean tradition" (2005: 256).

Bolivia emerged from the period of 2000-2005 as a country significantly altered. Stefanoni describes this period as a "hegemonic expansion" (2007: 54) of collective action that consolidated the interests of diverse groups, moving them towards an agenda of decolonisation, socialism, and popular participation. Aymara women in El Alto and La Paz were indispensable actors in this

period of transition, opposing the state on the grounds of their ethnic, class, and gender identities. As the subsequent analysis shows, this historical context links closely to how these women now understand women's empowerment and the actions they take to improve their well-being.

### **Empowerment from the perspective of urban Aymara women**

In the context of this wave of change that has engulfed Bolivia in recent years, I ask how Aymara women understand the concept of empowerment and how they make this term meaningful in their own livelihood struggles. Interviews and focus groups with Aymara women in El Alto and La Paz revealed that they conceptualise empowerment as the confluence of three factors: participation, leadership, and conflict. Participation refers to the contribution of one's personal viewpoint and the ability to take collective action as women. Leadership is specifically discussed in the context of local political entities and neighbourhood associations. Finally, conflict is understood as an important element of empowerment as it allows women to challenge existing power structures and create new spaces for female participation and leadership. In discussing their personal journeys of empowerment, Aymara women embed their discussion of participation, leadership, and conflict within the narrative of social mobilisations that destabilised the neoliberal regime and the subsequent political environment under Evo Morales.

#### *Empowerment as participation: Finding a voice and taking collective action*

According to Aymara women in El Alto and La Paz, participation is the first dimension of empowerment. Many actors—from feminist writers to the World Bank—have likewise identified participation in social movements, collective action, public institutions or political processes as an important element of the empowerment process. In this case, women understand participation as the act of voicing one's opinion in a public forum. "Empowerment is the power to say what is needed," declared one focus group participant. "Empowerment is when women start to question," added another. According to María, "[empowerment] is to empower yourself in those spaces where women have to be heard. It means to voice what we need." For Victoria, empowerment is "to be able to talk. To have the power of the word."

To illustrate the empowering impact of sharing one's opinion, I turn to the experiences shared by Sonia, a committed activist in one of La Paz's periphery neighbourhoods. At the time of research, Sonia served as the secretary for a local women's association that promoted the inclusion of women's needs in the political agendas of the local neighbourhood council and the La Paz municipality. Yet Sonia claims she was not always so involved. Quite to the contrary, Sonia was, until recently, a timid woman who spent most of her day at home with little knowledge or understanding of political processes. This began to change when a local NGO convinced Sonia to participate in the *Carta Orgánica*, a series of local meetings—mandated by Evo Morales in 2009—in which citizens and local organisations could participate in the design of the national policy agenda. Sonia was elected to the health committee, which debated various health policies to propose to the Morales Administration. Of the twenty-two members of the committee, Sonia described herself as the only non-health care professional. She sat in silence while the better-educated committee members expressed overwhelming support for privatised health services. Despite her fear of public speaking, Sonia was moved to voice her opinion and share her personal story of poverty and discrimination by the health care system. She now identifies this moment of participation as a turning point in her personal journey of empowerment. She recalls with pride how "the doctors realised that I was right and that everyone needed access to health care."

Many women view local NGOs as a valuable forum in which they can learn to express themselves freely and take this first step towards empowerment. One focus group participant explained that "when someone is only in the house, they don't know what's going on." For Silvia, participating in programmes offered by a local women's centre offers the opportunity to escape isolation and challenge voicelessness:

Before, women were marginalised. They didn't know their rights. We couldn't be in organisations, and we couldn't participate. It was only men. But now, something has

changed. The women come [to the community centre] to speak and to awaken their consciousness.... Here, we orient ourselves.

Drawing a connection between voicing an opinion, participation, and empowerment is not unique to Aymara women in El Alto and La Paz. Rowlands finds similar perceptions of empowerment among the participants of a Honduran women's programme, *Programa Educativo de la Mujer*. Rowlands reports:

Women also talked about the importance to them of being able to talk about personal problems, and in particular, to think with the other women about solutions for those problems. In the group they get access to information. The isolation of each woman in her house can be changed; she begins to realize that her individual problems are shared with others. A problem ceases to be an individual shortcoming, and can begin to be seen as a social or political issue that might have causes and solutions outside the four walls of the home (1997: 78).

While women connect empowerment to a process of participating through the contribution of their opinion, they also discuss participation as collective action. The association between women's collective action and women's empowerment resonates in the work of many feminist writers. The writers of DAWN identify women's collective action as indispensable; women's organisations are among the few entities that can make the perspectives of poor women a priority issue (Sen and Grown 1987, 89). According to Dighe and Jain (1989), "from a state of powerlessness that manifests itself in a feeling of 'I cannot,' empowerment contains an element of collective self-confidence that results in a feeling of 'we can'" (quoted in Rowlands, 1997: 22).

For many women, the importance of women's collective action rests on the new role women are called on to play in the Bolivia of Evo Morales. Sonia explained: "There is now a mandate that 50 percent of candidates for office at the national and municipal level be women. Women can't achieve this working alone, without partnerships. Working together, women influence the Constitution." Women's collective action is also viewed as a crucial activity given the entrenched patriarchy that persists in local politics. According to one activist: "Women need to build partnerships because alone, we can achieve nothing. They don't listen to us. They don't let us participate. By creating partnerships, we see that we have the same problems and that we need to work together to solve them."

While the importance attached to collective action is not unique to the Aymara community of El Alto and La Paz, it is nonetheless important to consider how cultural context influences these women's viewpoints. One local NGO staff member explained:

There are certain characteristics of the Bolivian culture that make us distinct and give empowerment a different meaning. First, we see the community as an entire whole. Community includes everyone. The process of dialogue and consensus is important. Everyone participates in the decision-making process.

Claims of consensus in community participation must not be accepted uncritically. In her study of indigenous politics, Van Cott (2010) warns that the tendency to depict indigenous communities as consensus-driven political entities masks diversity and conflict among different unions, associations, and groups. Nonetheless, this perception of community consensus-building as an Aymara cultural trait emerged during interviews as women articulated their idea of empowerment as closely related to an already-existing tradition of collective action.

The emphasis these women place on collective action further corresponds to the corpus of ethnographic data that describes the prominent role of solidarity among Aymara market women in El Alto and La Paz. As Aymara women emerged as key actors in the commercial economy, the market developed as a space where indigenous language and dress are accepted. In her study of the markets of La Paz, Loayza Castro (1997), finds that such a market environment cultivates solidarity among women of Aymara birth or descent.

This solidarity stems from the communication and support networks that market women rely on for stability and success in urban markets (Van den Berghe, 1974; Appleby, 1976). Market women build up social safety nets, providing one another with loans or emergency economic support (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2004). Furthermore, *cholas* regularly travel between the city and the rural communities that produce the goods they sell, strengthening ties between urban and rural indigenous communities. According to Seligmann, market dynamics explain why "rather than

becoming fully acculturated or assimilated into national society, [indigenous women] have formed ties of solidarity among themselves and with rural communities of indigenous peasants” (695). These “popular problem solving networks” (Albó, 2005: 253) that flourish among women of the markets contributed to the success of the social mobilisations of 2000 to 2005, lending themselves to efficient communication and rapid mobilisation of indigenous women (Lazar, 2006). The importance of collective action thus emerges as a prominent element in relationships between many Aymara market women in El Alto and La Paz, suggesting that the linkages they draw between empowerment and collective action corresponds to their broader social identities.

*Empowerment as leadership: Taking the reins of local change*

Among the women interviewed, leadership was the word most commonly used to express the meaning of empowerment. According to Isabel, empowerment is “to identify myself as a leader.” Martha described empowerment as “a process of learning how to lead.” Esther expressed a similar view: “Empowerment is participation. Participation is important because through participating, we become leaders and we change everything, even the world itself.”

Aymara women identify grassroots leadership as the type of leadership most closely associated with empowerment. One focus group participant said that empowerment is “increased spaces for women to participate in the neighbourhood councils.” Carmen commented: “Empowerment is being in the neighbourhood councils and other positions of leadership in the community.” Elizabeth stated:

We need to be part of the change. We need to be part of our country. Now, there are women as ministers, vice ministers, senators, and *diputadas*. It is important to realise this. But not only at the national level. It’s also important to be part of the community and to express ourselves freely. The constitution has changed to give us rights. Now, we need to make that a reality at the community level.

When asked to describe the qualities of a good leader, Elizabeth emphasised connection to the local level; to be a good leader is “to be organic, to come from the community.”

Women illustrated the empowering nature of local leadership with stories of how they have improved their communities in the wake of Morales’s election. Together with fellow members of a local women’s association, Sonia has launched a movement to create a *Casa de la Mujer* (Women’s House) in La Paz that will provide refuge to women fleeing domestic violence as well as a space for women who wish to organise. A civil servant of the La Paz Municipality that has worked with the women to achieve this goal observed how women have changed during the process: “It’s a change in attitude; before [women] begged for things.... Instead, they say ‘we have rights. We are going to use this space.’ They know who the authorities are, and they go and speak directly to them.”

How can we understand the overwhelming emphasis placed on *local* leadership as a vehicle of empowerment? Engaging a historical perspective of political and social change in El Alto and La Paz, I hypothesise that the value placed on local leadership in social movements reflects the important role social movements, neighbourhood associations, and local political organisations played in the popular uprisings of 2000 to 2005. In the city of El Alto in particular, social mobilisations grew out of the city’s system of local political organisation. A major form of community organisation in El Alto is the *junta vicinal*, or neighbourhood council. These entities, which are well organised and influential, provide citizens with social and economic safety nets, articulate citizenship, and mediate citizens’ relationship with formal government structures. Found in each of El Alto’s more than 600 neighbourhoods, these councils form the *Federación de Juntas Vecinales de El Alto* (Federation of Neighbourhood Councils of El Alto—FEJUVE). Although neighbourhood councils exist throughout Bolivia, Albó (2006) argues they are particularly interesting in El Alto not only for their organisation and influence, but also for their distinctive Aymara identity. He hypothesises that the organisation of El Alto into distinct neighbourhoods, each led by a neighbourhood council reflects the importance of community for the expression of Aymara identity in rural areas. Local political bodies and neighbourhood associations, such as the *juntas vecinales*, provided the backbone of the uprisings; many women now consider them powerful organisations and the leadership of these organisations as a vehicle for social change.

*Empowerment through conflict: Opening space and shifting roles*

Thus far, Aymara women have associated empowerment with participation and local leadership. Yet Aymara women included another element in their description of empowerment: conflict. Women discussed the productive nature of conflict that allowed them to open new spaces for participation and leadership. This section considers the relationship between conflict and empowerment and links the perspectives shared in interviews to ethnographic data on the role of conflict in urban Aymara political organizations.

Women's engagement in social movements and conflict attracts considerable attention from scholars of Latin America. Baldez (2002), for example, argues that women's movements emerge when two conditions are met: partisan realignment and the decision of women to use gender norms to frame their demands for inclusion in the political process. Another body of research argues that women structure their mobilisations around constructions of femininity: the Plaza de Mayo mothers in Argentina (Westwood & Radcliffe, 1993); the Chilean housewives mobilised against President Allende and later General Pinochet (Boyle, 1993; Power, 2002); and the CONAVIGUA widows of Guatemala (Schirmer, 1993). An emerging body of literature focuses on women's participation in social movements and conflicts on behalf of issues not traditionally considered gendered (e.g. Rodríguez's (1994) study of barrio women). The voices of the Aymara women interviewed sit at the intersection of these studies of gender, social movements, and conflict: they describe social mobilisation and conflict as an exhilarating element of the empowerment process, necessary for opening new spaces for participation and leadership.

Women from El Alto recall the 2003 Gas War as a conflict that opened space for female participation and leadership. Ofelia described the impact of the Gas War: "Before [the Gas War] women didn't have a space." According to Ofelia, the breakdown of order during the Gas War gave women the opportunity to assume positions of leadership that would have otherwise been unavailable to them. Rocio and Pilar are two examples of this process. Rocio is now a veteran activist, deeply committed to her community in El Alto where she has served on the neighbourhood council and lobbies on behalf of battered women. However, before the Gas War, Rocio had never participated in any form of collective action. She described herself as "without training or experience." Similarly, Pilar claimed she had never heard of feminism before the Gas War. Yet both Rocio and Pilar became leaders of their neighbourhoods during the events of October 2003. Rocio organised her neighbours and led them to safety the day Sánchez de Lozada sent the military into the streets. Pilar was one of the few women that stayed in her neighbourhood when the mobilisations reached their violent peak. Most women, including her daughter, sought refuge in more stable parts of the city, but Pilar remained and patrolled the streets by night.

Many scholars agree that social movements emerge partially in response to changes in political opportunities (Tilly, 1978; Mc Adam, 1982; Tarrow, 1994) and that mobilisations open new spaces for the redefinition of gender roles (González & Kampwirth, 2001; Kampwirth, 2004). Studies of women and social movements in Latin America support these claims, observing that women are often at the forefront of popular struggles. Yet, they also observe that women retreat when the conflict has been resolved (Molyneux, 1985). Arizpe describes women as "the warm swell which rises in fury only in times of extremity" (1990: xiv). Yet the Aymara women of El Alto offered an alternative perspective. Ofelia argued that the Gas War fundamentally shifted women's role, noting that "since the Gas Wars, women have continued to grow as leaders." Ofelia's statement is confirmed by Dosh and Kligerman (2010; see also Salazar de la Torre, 1999): prior to 2003, women held no more than two executive council seats in the FEJUVE in any given year; by 2008, women's representation on the FEJUVE council had increased to ten of the 52 seats. And in July 2010, delegates elected Fanny Nina as the first woman president of the FEJUVE.

Aymara women describe the Gas War as an opportunity to confront patriarchal power and to compensate for the paucity of male leadership. "Empowerment is important because it helps us confront discrimination. [Men] say we are weak and incapable of anything. They still shut women up. Many traditions tell us that women shouldn't have opinions," stated Sonia. In Pilar's view, women played an instrumental role in the success of the uprisings:

The women decided to change the president. We decided that [Sánchez de Lozada] had to be kicked out. We had to be united. Us women met at night. We spoke and discussed what could be changed, and what objectives we could achieve. Goni's [Sánchez de Lozada's] exile was our greatest moment of triumph.

Isabel described her process of empowerment as standing up to the sexist members of her neighbourhood council. When she tried to participate in the council, the men told her "go back to your kitchen." Isabel continued to fight, "pushing my way into the conversation" and participating "despite the protests of men" (interview). This conflict with her neighbourhood council was essential for Isabel; without confronting men, she does not believe she would have achieved the right to participate.

The importance of conflict from the viewpoint of the women interviewed becomes even clearer when their responses are compared to those of local NGO staff: women and NGO staff often retold the same events when discussing empowerment, however, women's retelling framed these events as conflicts. Local NGO staff often referred to the allies they had in the municipal government. Conversely, many women viewed their interaction with the municipality as a "fight" and a "struggle." Some women also described their experience in the *Carta Orgánica* as a conflict. Women recalled how they mobilised to create a committee on gender, a topic that was overlooked by the event's organisers. Through successful lobbying efforts, the women established a gender committee, only to be frustrated when a man was elected as the committee's president. The women mobilised again, demanding a re-election and arguing that a male-dominated committee could not ensure frank discussions about gender concerns. Through their protests, these women secured a re-election with a woman emerging as president of the committee. According to Teresa:

The councils are still very sexist. The men of the councils don't let women work and they don't let women make suggestions. Women need to be more empowered so that they enter without fear into the neighbourhood councils. Shouting, we need to enter the councils!

In this case, Aymara women view conflict as an unavoidable element of the empowerment process, while NGO staff do not incorporate conflict into their narrative. How can this difference be explained?

I turn to ethnographic work that highlights the contentious nature of neighbourhood councils and local political bodies in El Alto as a potential explanatory factor. *Juntas vecinales* in El Alto are recognised as central organisations, and the citizens of El Alto follow their leadership and respond to their instructions for mobilisation. However, they do not always do so freely; Albó (2006) describes how the neighbourhood councils used coercion and threats to mobilise communities during the uprisings of 2003 and 2005. Lazar (2008) and Arbona (2007) likewise find that neighbourhood councils are just as often sites of conflict as they are sites of consensus. Citizens go to the neighbourhood councils to settle disputes over land, property, and businesses. When the councils do not rule in their favour, citizens often use accusations of corruption and theft—whether justified or not—to induce a change in council leadership. However, such conflict is not viewed negatively, rather it is understood as a normal and productive element of political life. I place evidence that suggests the productive role conflict plays in Aymara notions of empowerment alongside this ethnographic evidence that points to the central role conflict plays within urban Aymara political organisations.

#### *Constructing the empowered woman and her antithesis*

In describing the notion of empowerment, many women illustrate their ideas by describing what an empowered woman is *not*. Firstly, a woman that lacks empowerment is "timid." "They are still timid; they will voice their thoughts in safe spaces, but not in public," explained Pilar. When asked to explain how she is empowered, Carmen said: "I've stopped being timid. I'm not scared. I have more desire to participate." When describing herself before she became empowered, Isabel said: "Before, I was very quiet and timid." Secondly, women describe the disempowered woman as domestic. Beatriz said they "are always with the children. They are confined to the home." According to Julia, empowerment "helps" women who "stay in the kitchen, taking care of the children." Similarly Sonia criticised disempowered women who "stay in their kitchens and lack



knowledge.” Carmen considered herself more empowered than her neighbours because “they don’t leave their house. They are taking care of the children and the husband and the home.” Elizabeth considered empowerment important because: “Women are always in the house, taking care of the children while the husband works. Many women don’t want to make their own decisions. They are accustomed to their routine. It is important to try to change their minds anyway.” Finally, many women associate disempowerment with submission to the traditional authority of husbands. Ofelia said that women who are not empowered “think their husband is the ultimate authority.” When asked to describe why she considers herself empowered, Teresa explained: “Before, I was a passive woman who conformed to others. Now, I make decisions. Before, I stayed at home. Now, I participate. I leave my house, and I speak with my husband.”

Although many women criticise the disempowered woman for her attachment to the household and her subservience to her husband, some women admit that they, while empowered in public, are disempowered in private. Cecilia demonstrated considerable pride in her position as leader of a local NGO’s microenterprise project for women: “I don’t like to remain quiet and to shut up. Whether it’s something good or bad, I speak up.... It has been my experience to control and to speak. That is why I’m leader of the group.” “But,” she continues, “I’m not like this in the house. There, I don’t express myself freely.” Norah, the group’s secretary, described her husband as “unapiedra en el camino”—a rock in the road. Her husband controls decisions, angers easily with Norah, and withholds his salary from her. In the house, Norah works as an “esclavo sin sueldo”—a slave without wages. Anecdotal evidence of abuse among interview respondents corresponds to studies of the alarmingly high rates of domestic violence in Bolivia (Koch, 2006). Yet the women interviewed do not view their subjugation in the house as contradictory to their empowerment in public. While they lack the power to participate in, or lead, the household, they believe their ability to participate in civil society is evidence that they are empowered women.

## Conclusion

This study has sought to answer the question: In El Alto and La Paz, how do Aymara women understand empowerment, and do their voices agree or disagree with the international scholarship on empowerment? Aymara women associate empowerment principally with ideas of participation and local leadership. While some scholars do focus on leadership as an indicator of empowerment, the overwhelming emphasis Aymara women place on leadership sets them apart from the current scholarship. Among the women interviewed, participation and leadership are especially valued in neighbourhood councils and local political associations. In their opinion, achieving participation and eventually leadership within civil society will lead to fundamental changes by orienting decision-making towards women’s perspectives. Furthermore, research revealed that women consider conflict—often in the form of social mobilisation or contestation of male-dominated spaces—a productive activity. Rather than shying away from conflict, they embrace conflict and at times provoke it, identifying conflict as a liberating experience.

In response to new opportunities for civil society influence in formal politics, Aymara women have placed greater value on leadership at the local level. Studies of empowerment need to embed the local within the national and global. By identifying the interconnectivity between Aymara women in El Alto and La Paz, national politics, and international scholarship, I call for a framework that captures how institutions, politics, and society construct empowerment.

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